

## **Voters to decide fate of ambulance transport fees Nov. 2**

(Excerpt from Wednesday, Oct. 27, 2010 Gazette)

I am a paramedic associated with the Upper Montgomery County Volunteer Fire Department who wishes to clarify some misinformation being spread about question A, the ambulance reimbursement ballot measure.

The Montgomery County Volunteer Fire and Rescue Association did, in fact, vote to fight the implementation of the law that allows the county to seek reimbursement from insurance companies, Medicare and Medicaid for ambulance transports, but that decision by the association won only by a slight margin.

As it is, many of the volunteers I work with do not agree with the association's stance against ambulance billing, yet we have no voice within that association as individuals. We have watched helplessly as the volunteer association has manufactured facts, misquoted figures, manipulated words and spread fear among the general populace about future fees, hard billing, or where the money is going. Eric Bernard, the executive director of the volunteer association, has been divisive on so many issues it is hard to pick just one, but for the record, he does not speak for all of the fire and rescue volunteers within Montgomery County.

Personally, I am disgusted with the way he has repeatedly antagonized and polarized a system that should work very closely and smoothly together. A primary reason the volunteer association does not wish to see this pass is because they fear it would result in fewer donations to the individual volunteer fire departments by the community. They fear the community would think, "Why would I donate when the insurance company is already paying?" The answer is that the insurance company won't pay for all of it. Furthermore, dear taxpayer, you are already paying for it in both your insurance and your taxes. How does that make sense?

If this law gets repealed, and the ambulance reimbursement requests do not go to insurance companies, there are going to be fewer ambulances and medic units available. The loss of \$14 million in an already very tight budget will result in the loss of career firefighters and therefore the loss of emergency services. The volunteers will not be able to pick up the slack. Bernard and the volunteer association quote large, impressive numbers of volunteers every time I turn around. The truth of the matter is, even if those numbers were correct, (and personally, I highly doubt their veracity), those numbers do not reflect the actual number of active EMS and fire providers able to staff units, or who are currently on the Integrated Emergency Command Structure list as certified providers. In other words, folks, we need that money.

I am not a registered Republican, but I do believe in smaller government, and I would rather see any money that is reimbursed by the insurance companies returned to the tax payers. It is a shame that the vote didn't go that direction when the issue of reimbursement originally came up. But, the law was passed, and the resulting income was counted on in this year's budget. The horses are already out of the barn. Returning them would cost the county \$14 million. That means it would cost you and me \$14 million, either in the form of money or services. It has got to come from somewhere ... it's either going to come from a tax hike, new county-imposed fees elsewhere, or cuts in services.

Understand this: If you vote "no" on the ambulance reimbursement, it will translate to you, the county taxpayer, as longer response times during an emergency because there will be fewer units and fewer personnel out there to respond — or it will translate to you in the form of higher taxes and fees — or both. Every department in the county could be affected ... attorney's office, snow removal, human services, anything the county budgets for will be at risk in this cut.

I am voting yes on question A to keep the law that allows reimbursement for county ambulance services, and I am a county volunteer medic, and I see firsthand why this county needs it.

Pamela Boe, Dickerson